Collection des Études Augustiniennes

Série Antiquité - 208

EXÉGÈSE, RÉVÉLATION ET FORMATION DES DOGMES DANS L'ANTIQUITÉ TARDIVE

Volume édité par

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PARIS
2020

Ouvrage publié avec le soutien de l'École pratique des Hautes Études (LEM, UMR 8584)

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ISBN : 978-2-85121-308-2
ISSN : 1158-7032

Oracles and Revelations as a Philosophical Mannerism

With the passing of Proclus in 485 C.E., the leadership of the Neoplatonic school at Athens passed on to his successor and biographer, Marinus of Flavia Neapolis in Samaria[1]. Much maligned by his rivals in the school for his mathematical and uninspired approach to philosophy[2], Marinus was said to be incapable of attaining the mystical contemplation *(theoria)* of his master, Proclus[3]. In reality, his analytical and mathematical *exegeses* reflected a path previously laid out by his teacher particularly in:

1. his introduction to Euclid's *Data*[4];
2. and various exegeses on sections of Plato's *Republic*, *Philebus* and the *Parmenides*[5].

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1. On the succession, see: R.M. VAN DEN BERG, *Proclus' Hymns. Essays, Translations, Commentary*, Leiden, 2001, p. 3-5. Background still in: O. SCHISSEL VON FLESCHENBERG, *Marinos von Neapolis u. d. neuplatonischen Tugengrade*, Athens, 1928. On his Samaritan birth, see: M. STERN, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, II, Jerusalem, 1980, p. 671-679.

2. On their tendentious criticism of Marinus as "lacking a natural inclination" for philosophy, see: M. LUZ, "Marinus: an Eretz-Israel Neoplatonist at Athens", in *Greece and Rome in Eretz-Israel. Collected Essays*, A. Kasher,– U. Rappaport – G. Fuchs (ed.), Jerusalem, 1990, p. 92-97. Damascius' negative appraisal of Marinus is still sometimes upheld (C. STEEL, "Proclus", in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity* II, L.P. Gerson [ed.], Cambridge, 2010, p. 631, n. 2).

3. Damascius' *Life of Isidorus*: C. ZINTZEN, *Damascii Vitae Isidori Reliquiae*, Hildesheim, 1967, Fr. 244 (p. 199).

4. Extending the method set out by Proclus in Euclid's *Elements* I to Euclid's *Data*, Marinus examines not only the meaning of the Euclidean "given" (δεδομένον), but also its use and systematic place in science, comparing later mathematicians and philosophers as well (Euc. vi. c. 234 (Menge); M. MICHAUX, *Le commentaire de Marinus aux* Data *d'Euclide*, Louvain, 1947; trans. and older text in: C.M. TAISBAK, *Euclid's Data ΔΕΔΟΜΕΝΑ*, Copenhagen, 2003.

5. Cf. PROCLUS, *in R.* II. 200 *l.* 30 (Kroll), for Marinus on the myth of Er; DAMASCIUS, *Isid.*, fr. 42, 90 (p. 66-67, Zintzen) for his epistolary dispute on Plato's *Phlb* and fr. 245 (p. 201) on

However, as with Proclus, there was also a religious and revelatory side to Marinus' commentaries not appreciated by his contemporaries[6]. In his hagiographical account of his master's life[7], he ascribes to him a notion presupposing a universal theology encompassing all religious customs and practices that the philosopher was expected to expound. He claims that Proclus was in the habit of stating that a philosopher should be minister of no particular ancestral customs, but be "hierophant" of what is common to the whole world:

> Marinus, *Vita Procli*, Cap. xix, p. 47-48, Boissonade p. 16.
>
> ὅτι τὸν φιλόσοφον προσήκει οὐ μιᾶς τινὸς πόλεως, οὐδὲ τῶν παρ' ἐνίοις πατρίων εἶναι θεραπευτήν, κοινῇ δὲ τοῦ ὅλου κόσμου ἱεροφάντην.
>
> "It behoves the philosopher to be no minister of any one city, nor even of any particular people's ancestral (rites), but to be a sacral hierophant of the entire world in common."

Albeit the concept of religious rite is not mentioned explicitly, but the terms "minister" and "hierophant" (θεραπευτήν … ἱεροφάντην) in this text presuppose a religious if not ritual background. Whether intended metaphorically or ritualistically, the philosopher is here conceived as one who interprets certain truths that are generally held throughout the world. In its literal sense, the term "hierophant" referred to a priest who *revealed* or gave *instructions* concerning sacred objects and practices notably, but not solely, in the Mysteries of Eleusis[8]. In this sense, the context would infuse the role of the philosopher with religious overtones as one who revealed certain religious truths about the gods or rites practised in their name. However, in the context of a philosophical school, the sense would naturally refer to the capacity of someone who interprets philosophical or theosophical beliefs and *logoi* in a more universal sense. Nonetheless, even in this context, there are a number of questions needing to be asked. Is the use of the term "hierophant":

Parm. Fr. 245 (p. 201). The testimonies regarding his explanation of the Aristotelian external *nous* ([Philoponus], *in de An*., 535), could be derived either from his lectures, or from one of his works.

6. On this aspect of Marinus, see: M. LUZ, "Marinus' Abrahamic Notions of the Soul and One", in *Proclus and his Legacy*, D. Layne – D. Butorac (ed.), Berlin – Boston, 2017, p. 145-158. In relation to Proclus, see: C. STEEL, "Proclus", in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, II, *op. cit*., p. 631; C. ADDEY, "Oracles, Religious Practices and Philosophy in Late Neoplatonism", *Practical Philosophy*, 8/2, 2007, p. 31-32.

7. Text in: J.F. BOISSONADE, *Marini Vita Procli* (Amsterdam, 1966 = Leipzig, 1814).

8. Its meaning in: Hesychius I 329, *Suda I* 195.1 (<Ἱεροφάντης:> μυσταγωγός, ἱερεύς); its supposed etymology in *Suda I* 196.1: τὸν ἀποφήναντα ἐκ τοῦ πολέμου ἀπιόντα τὰ ἱερά. Its first surviving literary appearance is late 5th BCE (Isocrates vi 33.5, vii 9.5; Lysias 2.1, 54.1; Hellanicus 6). In general: K. CLINTON, "Hierophantes", in *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (1996[3]), *s.v.*; J. PEDLEY, *Sanctuaries and the Sacred in the Ancient Greek World*, Cambridge, 2005, p. 94-95 (on this and the Eleusinian mysteries).

1. merely a metaphorical mannerism referring to a philosopher in the role of someone who reveals the meaning of philosophical texts?
2. or literally in reference to the philosopher as a ritualistic functionary albeit confined to the time and space of his school?
3. or is it possibly a combination of both?

In each case the terms minister and hierophant also presuppose a distinction: between the limited capacity of a minister of particular customs – in this text, denied the philosopher – and the universal role of a hierophant that a philosopher should assume in order to reveal what is common to ancestral customs throughout the world. In the latter case, there is also a distinction to be drawn between the commonly held feature (κοινῆ) of the customs and their use throughout the entire world (τοῦ ὅλου κόσμου)[9]. Unless this is merely tautological, we should examine whether this refers to what is *common* as a theological principle – *viz.* the inter-communality of the ancestral rites – and their universality throughout the *whole* world. In both cases, the philosopher's function as a universal hierophant of what is common to ancestral rites could be interpreted either as *a metaphorical mannerism* used to describe his role as exegete of the texts – or literally, as a religious hierophant in a philosophical school revealing the universality of the religious practice practised there – or both in a metaphorical and literal sense.

I. – The description of the philosopher as "hierophant" as a metaphorical mannerism

We should first note that Proclus himself employed the term "hierophant" in his own works three times – and none of them in a *ritualistic* sense. Each is used in reference to philosophical revelation: twice of Plato and once in connection with Proclus' own beloved teacher, Syrianus[10]. However, in contrast to the text from Marinus, all of them are employed as description of these particular philosophers and not of what is generally expected of every philosopher. This metaphorical *mannerism* of the philosopher as one who *reveals* hidden truths has, of course, a longer history than Proclus. Setting aside the poems of Hesiod, not as philosophy, but mere cosmic speculation, we immediately recall the mid 6th century Pherecydes of Syros, weaving an allegorical interpretation around Hesiod's mythology to *reveal* some hidden philosophical truth[11]. More sophisticated is the role that Parmenides

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9. See M. Luz, "Marinus' Abrahamic Notions…", art. cit.

10. *In R.* I p. 71 (Kroll) τὸν ἐκείνου (scil., Πλάτωνος) ζηλωτὴν καί … ἱεροφάντην; *in Parm.* 618. 6 (Cousin) τῶν θείων τούτων λόγων ὄντως ἱεροφάντης (*viz.* Syrianus); *Theolog. Pl.* I 6 (Saffrey-Westerink) προηγεμόνα καὶ ἱεροφάντην ἀποκαλῶν (scil., Πλάτωνα). See also: Proclus, *Théologie platonicienne*, I, ed. H.D. Saffrey – L.G. Westerink, Paris, 1968, p. 6 n. 1 "en ce sens métaphorique".

11. *DK* I 1. Although the fragments are brief, they supposedly reveal the Hesiodic gods and Titans as cosmic principles: Zas (Zeus), Chronos (Kronos), and Chthoneia (Gaia); M.L. West,

cast for himself as one who *revealed* his philosophical encounter with the mythic goddesses at the gates of light[12]. Neither, however, used the term *hierophant* and it is not until the first century CE when we first find it employed in a philosophical context:

1. Philo uses the term *hierophantic* to describe not only Biblical works, but also philosophical works of the Pythagoreans[13];
2. Around the same time, Epictetus compared his own philosophical discourse to the practice of the hierophants of the Mysteries[14].
3. In Neoplatonism, this metaphorical/philosophical use of "hierophant" was also applied by Porphyry in respect to Plotinus[15] as well as to his own philosophy as a sort of oracular revelation[16]. Similarly, Julian regarded Iamblichus as his own educator and ἱεροφάντωρ into the mysteries of philosophy[17].

Granted this aspect of the philosophical hierophant, we may wonder if Marinus' description of Proclus' remark did not also presuppose a unified theology to explain the universal principle common to all religious customs and to be revealed by the hierophantic philosopher? However, we do not find anything clear in his works that would explain such a theological principle in relation to universal religious practices. Even his discussion of the unity and plurality of God better recalls the metaphysical principles of unity and plurality discussed in his commentary on the *Parmenides*[18].

Hesiod's Theogony, edited with Prolegomena and Commentary, Oxford, 1971; H.S. SCHIBLI, *Pherekydes of Syros*, Oxford, 1990.

12. *Presoc*. I 28 1-4, 22-30; 2 1-8.

13. Cf., e.g. PHILO *LA* iii.173 τοῦ ἱεροφάντου καὶ προφήτου Μωυσέως; or PLUTARCHUS *Num*. 22.4 on a collection of βίβλους ἱεροφαντικάς along with (Pythagorean) philosophical ones.

14. EPICTETUS, *Diss*. iii. 21.13 ἐκεῖ (scil., ἐν Ἐλευσῖνι) ἱεροφάντης· καὶ ἐγὼ ποιήσω ἱεροφάντην. Strictly speaking, this metaphor could have originated with Arrian from a period only slightly after Philo.

15. PORPHYRIUS, *Vit. Plot*. 15.6 on Plotinus reading all literature: the poet, the philosopher and hierophant (τὸν ποιητὴν καὶ τὸν φιλόσοφον καὶ τὸν ἱεροφάντην) . Cf. C. ADDEY, "Oracles, Religious Practices…", art. cit., p. 32-33.

16. In Porphyry's *On Philosophy as Revealed through Oracles* the philosopher is meant to *reveal* and spread philosophy ἐκ λογίων as a kind of religion revealed through oracular response. Cf. PORFIRIO, *La Filosofia Rivelata dagli oracoli con tutti frammenti di Magia, Stregoneria, Teosofia, e Teurgia*, G. Girgenti – G. Muscolino (ed., trans.), Milano, 2011, where Porphyry is described as a serious religious exegete and *hierophant* of earlier pagan literature (p. xi-xii; ix-lxix).

17. Especially, Julian on Iamblichus' role as a revealer of philosophical teaching: ὁ κλεινὸς ἡμῖν ἔδειξε [καὶ] ἱεροφάντωρ Ἰάμβλιχος (Wright, III fr. 4 p. 297).

18. PROCLUS, *Theolog. Plat*. 3.14, 4 Θεὸς οὖν εἷς καὶ θεοὶ πολλοί: to be interpreted either

II. – The philosopher hierophant as religious functionary

On the other hand, there is no denying that there were also actual religious practices in Proclus' school and that these were indeed based not solely on the ancestral customs of the Greeks, but also on the observance of *the religious calendars* of all peoples[19]. This is said to have involved the habit of singing or reciting hymns to various gods on the important religious holidays of every land and especially on the days holy to the Egyptians and Chaldeans[20]. Hence, the criticism that was raised that they worshipped "as many gods as possible", and not as "just metaphysical abstractions", but as beings in direct contact with mortals[21]. We should, therefore, distinguish between any "philosophy of religion" that could be ascribed to Proclus and the actual practices in his school[22]. It emerges from the text of Marinus that his discussion of this issue was intended as an answer to critics who claimed that Proclus was forever feasting on the holy days in the calendars of every religion for Marinus adds that his master regularly abstained from eating and drinking even on such holy days, merely tasting (a little) out of piety (*Vit. Prcl.* xix). However, celebration of holy days is not just a matter of eating and drinking, but surely must have involved minimal sacrificial or theurgic ritual even merely by way of libation of wine, or the burning of incense. Celebration of a holy day spent entirely in the revelation of the meaning of philosophical texts is not unsuited for a philosopher hierophant in the metaphorical sense. However, when this is preceded or accompanied by feasting as Marinus testifies, the philosopher would have been expected also to do the roles of a hierophant of ritualistic practice. This would mean that even if these religious holidays were totally philosophical in spirit, one part of the philosopher's function – even the most minute or secondary – must have been devoted to ritual in a *non-metaphorical* sense.

We should furthermore note that, in our passage from Marinus, Proclus is not meant to have denied the philosopher a role as therapeutic minister of ancestral customs πατρίων … θεραπευτήν, but rather that it should not be of any one single *polis*. His higher fulfilment is then as the loftier hierophant of what is commonly held by the whole world (κοινῆ δὲ τοῦ ὅλου κόσμου). Although the text

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as even many gods are one god or there is one god, and there are also many gods. Many of his philosophical principles are traced back to Syrianus (C. D'Ancona, "Syrianus comme source de Proclus (I)", in *Proclus et la théologie platonicienne*, Actes du colloque international de Louvain (13-16 mai 1998), A.-Ph. Segonds – C. Steel (ed.), Leuven – Paris, 2000, p. 189-225; C. Luna, "La doctrine des principes: Syrianus comme source textuelle et doctrinale de Proclus", *op. cit.*, p. 227-278.

19. G.R. Morrow, *Proclus, A Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's Elements*, Princeton, 1970, p. xl-xli.

20. Van den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns*, p. 30-31.

21. Van den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns*, p. 3-4.

22. Sources on feast/fast days in the school as well as offerings are discussed in: M. Luz, "Marinus' Abrahamic Notions…", art. cit.

does not specify who exactly was meant to be this hierophant, he at least superficially resembles some ideal philosopher, if not the actual leader of the school – be that Proclus from Marinus' later hind-sight – or one of their predecessors from the Proclus' point of view. For Marinus, Proclus could have been conceived as a *hierophant* of the universal rites of the school even if the master may have been wary of applying this title to himself. We know, for example, not only that Proclus expounded philosophical texts, but also composed religious hymns of his own. However, it is unclear from the surviving examples of his hymnal compositions whether they were actually recited on the festive days observed within the school[23]. Neither do they help interpret the principle of a universally common religion[24] although the surviving collection has been described as "only a fraction of Proclus' hymns" that seemingly included songs to non-Greek deities as well[25].

III. – The philosopher as hierophant
both as a metaphorical mannerism and as a ritualistic functionary

We have seen that Proclus himself employed the term hierophant in a purely philosophical connotation and as a metaphorical mannerism, but that Marinus discusses this issue in relation to his master's participation in religious rites in a non-metaphorical sense. However, neither explanation negates the other when we examine the context of Proclus' Hymn IV. There the philosopher describes the mystical and almost "theurgic" aura *revealed* through the act of reciting religious song. He reveals how the deities shed holy light (φάος ἁγνὸν ἀποσκεδάσαντες), dispersing the darkness (*l.* 6) and leading to knowledge of god and man that is acquired through a study of divine books (ζαθέων δ' ἀπὸ βίβλων *l.* 5). Although this text also refers to the practice of rites and rituals (ὄργια καὶ τελετάς *l.* 15), the gods are summoned "to reveal" them not directly, but through the reading of holy books "and sacred tales" (ἱερῶν ἀναφαίνετε μύθων). The role of the hierophant philosopher is thus most easily understood as one who *reveals* (ἀναφαίνειν) divine nature *through* these readings. However, while

23. Nonetheless, even if they did not play a religious or even ritualistic role in his own days, they possibly achieved this shortly afterwards as happened in the case of those hymns ascribed to Proclus' pupil Isidorus. Cf. Van den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns*, p. 30-31.

24. Proclus' *extant* hymns are dedicated to the traditional gods of Hellas with the exception of one Romano-Greek couplet (no. VI), and even the "Hymn Common to Gods" (ΥΜΝΟΣ ΚΟΙΝΟΣ ΕΙΣ ΘΕΟΥΣ, no. IV), as it was recently argued, was addressed to the gods of Hellas, too. Cf. Van den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns*, p. 227, in reply to H.D. Saffrey, "L'hymne IV de Proclus prière aux dieux des oracles chaldaïques", in *Néoplatonisme. Mélanges offerts à Jean Trouillard*, Fontenay-aux-Roses, 1981, p. 297-312.

25. Van den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns*, p. 5. Cf. C. Horn, "Proklos. Zur philosophiegeschichtlichen Stellung und zum Forschungsstand", in *Proklos Methode, Seelenlehre, Metaphysik*, Akten der Konferenz in Jena am 18.-20. September 2003, M. Perkams – R.M. Piccione (ed.), Leiden – Boston, 2006, p. 26.

this hymn is testimony to rites, rituals, hymns and revelation through readings of divinely inspired books read in the school[26], it is still no proof that Hymn IV was sung as part of any ritual itself, rather than describing and reflecting the aura of such philosophical and religious meetings[27]. The actual hymns and practices of these meetings are more obscure, but their philosophical and revelatory purpose is clear from the context of Hymn IV itself.

Oracles and revelations are a multi-faceted phenomenon[28]. There is clear line of development of theophantic thought from Porphyry down to Proclus, where the primary role of the philosopher is as a hierophant who reveals philosophical truth. Although the philosopher sometimes adopts the *endeictic* role of one who reveals his own subjective, but other-worldly experiences, what distinguishes his role from that of Biblical prophets and seers is that the revelation is explained by the philosophical principles of earlier compositions.

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26. Previously considered to be Chaldean oracles, VAN DEN BERG, *Proclus' Hymns* (p. 234), now suggests that these would be more general, possibly including Homer, Orpheus and even Plato.

27. But see R.M. VAN DEN BERG, "Towards the Paternal Harbour", in *Proclus et la théologie platonicienne*, *op. cit.*, p. 434, 436.

28. P. TOWNSEND – M. VIDAS, *Revelation, Literature and Community in Late Antiquity* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism, 146), Tübingen, 2011.

TABLE DES MATIÈRES

INTRODUCTION 9

Luc BRISSON, « Une exégèse fondée sur l'accord entre la théologie de Platon et les théologies orphique et chaldaïque dans les Écoles d'Athènes et d'Alexandrie » 19

Menahem LUZ, « Oracles and Revelations as a Philosophical Mannerism » 37

Helmut SENG, « Exégèses des *Oracles chaldaïques* de Porphyre à Pléthon : le fr. 110 des Places » 45

Andrei TIMOTIN, « Le "signe démonique" de Socrate dans la tradition platonicienne, de l'exégèse à la croyance »..... 65

Jordi PIÀ, « Prière et appropriation des dogmes dans le stoïcisme impérial : vers une conversion philosophique de nature religieuse ? » 77

Chiara O. TOMMASI, « À la recherche des *uiri noui* : stratégies de la réfutation et enjeux polémiques chez Arnobe » 101

Sébastien MORLET, « Les arguments de Porphyre ont-ils joué un rôle dans la constitution des doctrines chrétiennes ? » 135

Stéphane RATTI, « Le Diptyque des Nicomaques et des Symmaques au cœur de la polémique pagano-chrétienne » 157

Francesco MASSA, « Les "mystères" chez Eusèbe de Césarée : entre débat philosophique et polémique religieuse » 173

Laurent LAVAUD, « Métaphysique et Révélation : le débat entre Eunome de Cyzique et Grégoire de Nysse » 197

Lorenzo PERRONE, « "Et l'homme tout entier devient dieu" : la déification selon Origène à la lumière des nouvelles *Homélies sur les Psaumes* » 213

Marie-Odile BOULNOIS, « Le rôle de l'exégèse pour la formation du dogme chrétien dans la polémique antijuive : le cas de la théophanie de Mambré (Gn 18) » 241

Giovanni FILORAMO, « La conception augustinienne de la *uisio dei* : de la polémique au dogme » 269

Nicoletta BROCCA, « Écritures, christologie et (un peu de) philosophie dans la révélation sibylline » 281

Aude BUSINE, « Usages divinatoires du livre : une “anti-exégèse” ? » 297

INDEX 311

TABLE DES MATIÈRES 317

COLLECTION DES ÉTUDES AUGUSTINIENNES
SÉRIE ANTIQUITÉ 208

Exégèse, révélation et formation des dogmes dans l'Antiquité tardive, volume édité par Alain LE BOULLUEC, Luciana Gabriela SOARES SANTOPRETE et Andrei TIMOTIN.

Depuis les études de Pierre Hadot, on sait que la démarche philosophique à la fin de l'Antiquité prend principalement la forme d'une exégèse des textes faisant autorité, non sans altérer leur visée première. Dès lors qu'ils sont perçus comme l'objet d'une révélation divine, cette herméneutique est indissociable d'une théologie. La lecture et le commentaire des textes impliquent une adhésion quasi religieuse à leur contenu doctrinal, lequel est près d'être assumé comme un ensemble d'articles de foi. Ces deux aspects complémentaires se sont accentués dans une relation complexe de rivalité avec le christianisme.
Cette transition progressive d'une conception philosophique du monde à une perception religieuse dans l'Antiquité tardive, du Ier siècle au VIe, n'a pas été suffisamment analysée. Le présent livre veut contribuer à combler cette lacune. Il fait se croiser les perspectives de divers spécialistes – historiens de la philosophie ancienne, des religions du monde gréco-romain et de la patristique – autour de trois thèmes de réflexion précis : la place des révélations théologiques dans le discours philosophique de l'Antiquité tardive, la démarche exégétique comme source des dogmes philosophiques et théologiques, ainsi que le rôle de la polémique dans l'instauration d'un nouveau rapport entre croyances et philosophie.

Following the studies of Pierre Hadot, we know that the main approach to philosophy in Late Antiquity takes the form of an exegesis of authoritative texts, not without altering their primary aim. As soon as the texts come to be perceived as the products of a divine revelation, the hermeneutics applied to them are indistinguishable from a theology. Reading and commenting on the revelatory texts imply an almost religious adherence to their doctrinal content, which is close to being understood as articles of belief. These two complementary aspects were accentuated in a complex relationship of rivalry with Christianity.
The gradual transition from a philosophical to a religious conception of the world in Late Antiquity, from the first to the sixth century, has not been sufficiently analysed. This book aims to help fill this gap. It brings together the perspectives of various specialists – historians of ancient philosophy, religions in the Graeco-Roman world, and patristics – around three specific themes: the place of theological revelations within the philosophical discourse in Late Antiquity, the exegetical approach as a source of philosophical and theological dogmas, and the role of polemics in the establishment of a new relationship between beliefs and philosophy.

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Diffusion exclusive : Brepols
www.brepols.net

ISBN : 978-2-85121-308-2
ISSN : 1158-7032
43 €